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In this case study of a young deaf child, his mother relates his progress in language acquisition through the use of signs, finger spelling, speechreading, and auditory training. Other members of the child's family are deaf and the child received training at the Gallaudet preschool from the age of 30 months. The author believes that there are distinct advantages to a "bilingual acquisition of English and sign language," especially in allowing the child to express his needs, questions, and responses in either language. Without early training in sign language, a deaf child may have some language competence (if he becomes a very good lipreader), but "he will be terribly hampered in his formative preschool years." The author concludes from her experiences that sign language can be made into a visual equivalent of English and should be used at an early age as one means of communication between children and their teachers. (JD)

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BILINGUAL EXPERIENCES OF A DEAF CHILD

Judy Williams

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Gallaudet College, November 1968

My husband and I had long expected that our children would have impaired hearing. Our genetic makeup showed this: our parents, my uncle and his four sons are deaf on my side, and four uncles on his side. And so are we. I was born deaf. My husband lost his hearing at the age of six months during an attack of whooping cough, which could be a sign that he was easily susceptible to deafness. When our son Todd was born, he showed so much alertness with his eyes and was so unresponsive to normal sounds that we knew he was like us.

My main concern was not his inability to hear (he is nearly five now and I still don't even give it a thought), but was instead how well he could live within the hearing world. His language acquisition was far more important, since this could open many channels for him including speech, lipreading, manual communication, and writing. The most important part was being able at an early age to express himself linguistically in the simplest forms. Lack of this ability can lead to personality and psychological problems. So I started talking to him like all mothers do, cooing, babbling, singing nursery rhymes and the like -- but I added signs and fingerspelling while doing all this.

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It was not until he was nine months old that he finally expressed himself clearly in sign language. He loved to throw his spoon on the floor from his high chair and yell for me to pick it up. I always asked him signing and speaking, "Where is the spoon?" pointing to it before picking it up. This time he threw it again but asked me in signs, "Where spoon?" and pointed at it. This led soon to his substituting in this frame other signs (words) like ball, light, cat, dog, and book; and we

went on to using the "Pictionary" and "First Objects" and other books I read to him from while he looked at the objects pictured. By the time he was one year old he was able to identify about fifteen different things in short sentences. His vocabulary increased, but it was not until after he was toilet trained (at about twenty months) that I introduced him to fingerspelling and put a lot of stress on this way of presenting words. He mastered this kind of communication of sentences on his level in a few months and he associated the manual alphabet with the written alphabet. At twenty-five months he started reading, and when he was turning three he had five hundred words in his reading vocabulary and loved to read pre-primers and beginning-to-read books. His language developed in the simultaneous sense, that is, through lipreading my speech, fingerspelling, printed matter, and signs. I see no conflict in his bilingual acquisition of English and Sign Language but believe that it greatly aided him. He loved nursery rhymes and was able to recite them himself. He eventually used his speech and sang some syllables out loud.

I enrolled him in the Gallaudet preschool when he was thirty months old, and its program gave him a lot of auditory training and speech work which I was not able to give him at home. His hearing aid did wonders (although he has an 85 decibel loss in both ears across the whole frequency range), and he responded more to speech and showed willingness to learn to say words accurately.

From this point everything else seemed to come naturally, and his curiosity brought him even further, until I would say that he is progressing just as normally hearing children do except that he is less vocal. He learned spoken English very readily in expressive exercises, routines, monologues, and interpretations as well as in social responses and requests for information as the situation required. Simplification of grammatical structures was necessary in the early stages, but now

at four years and ten months he simplifies them himself for his sister Tiffany two years younger and elaborates the patterns for his Daddy.

His bilingual experience is in some ways like and in others unlike that of the American-Japanese bilinguals studied by Susan Ervin-Tripp (1964). Todd has a more general knowledge of Signs because that is the language more often used at home, and a specific knowledge of English from his education at home and in school. His is really a merger of the two languages therefore, as in the case of the Japanese women who tend to use Japanese for social intercourse and as their base language when with other bilinguals but who do use English as the situation and the persons talked to require. Todd relies more on his Signs than on his English with his family and more on spoken English in the classroom.

As Miss Erwin-Tripp says, ". . . *bilinguals who speak only with other* bilinguals may be on the road to merger of the two languages, unless there are strong pressures to insulate by topic or setting." Her hypothesis is that "as language shifts, content will shift." And she presents examples of the Japanese women's monologues in which moon, moon-viewing, zebra-grass, full moon and cloud are in Japanese and sky rocket and cloud are in English. This kind of difference needs more study in the case of Sign Language-English bilinguals. There may even be a trilingual situation -- some words in signs, some spoken, and some English spelled in the manual alphabet depending on the who, where, and what of the communication.

Another observation of hers is that the Japanese women "were in an abnormal situation" when one was asked to speak English with another Japanese woman. The effects on the style of English were clear when the two situations were compared. With the Japanese listener there was much more disruption of English syntax, more intrusion of Japanese words, and briefer speech.

This is also true in cases where two deaf children are forced to speak English to each other. I notice that Todd shortens his statements and tries to add signs between them. He uses more complex ideas, structures, and words in signs than in spoken English.

In school his English is more or less that of a four-year old in a pre-school situation. But at home when he was three years old, he asked me at the table (in signs) "Where does the meat go?" I asked him what he meant, and he replied: "Look, I swallow the meat, and where does it go?" I then explained to him in details he could understand and he was pleased and satisfied with the answer. Another time, about six months later, he asked me where a sound he was listening to came from. I told him I didn't know, but he insisted that I listen. I had to clarify my position by telling him that I couldn't hear anything at all but that he, Tiffany and Daddy have a little hearing. He was very much hurt by this and offered me his hearing aid, hoping I would respond to sound. When he learned that it was of no help, he cried and was upset for a while. Later I told him he could help me by telling me to move the car over when he hears fire engines or ambulances passing by, because I must give them right of way. He now delights in telling me when he hears a siren, and he lets me know when he hears a sound and identifies it for me: the vacuum cleaner, someone knocking on the door, and the like. He doesn't have much hearing but uses his residual hearing well and intelligently.

Are there any deaf children this age without sign language who can express themselves this well, ask such questions, and make such distinctions? There are none that I know of. Knowing signs also helps Todd in learning English vocabulary. For example, Todd learned about a Zebra in school but not the sign for it. When he came home he told me about the characteristics of this new animal so I could easily

identify what he was trying to find out -- both of us using his "base" language of signs.

For young deaf children the most important contribution of sign language is to the child's expression of his needs, questions, and responses. With it he can also develop other channels of language and expression. Without it he may have some receptive competence, if he happens to be a very good lipreader, but he will be terribly hampered in his formative preschool years. Moreover the spoken language the teachers are trying to instill in him becomes warped because he can't really use it expressively to ask questions and to make and try out corrections after being told of his grammatical mistakes.

Sign language has advantages for the hearing children of deaf parents as well. Their bilingual experience of serving their parents by making phone calls and receiving spoken messages can be very valuable. As they use both languages they translate from one to the other. The need to interpret for deaf parents makes them listen to adult conversation with more than normal childish attention. In return they get top grades in reading, spelling, grammar, and other subjects in school, as I found when I made a personal survey of my parents' deaf friends who have hearing children, about forty in all.

These observations agree with the results of Kathryn Meadow's study (1968). She notes that many professionals warn parents against sign language in case children are motivated not to learn speechreading and speech. Her study proves these fears false and shows that deaf children that are exposed to sign language in early childhood have better reading, speechreading, and written language scores. She concludes that "the deaf children of deaf parents [who use sign language] have a higher level of intellectual functioning, social functioning, maturity, independence,

communicative competence in written, spoken, expressive, and receptive language."

Sign language is not incompatible with English. In fact with some care about its order and by spelling English function words it can be made into a visual equivalent of English utterance. Unfortunately there is not a school in the United States that uses it as a medium of communication between teacher and pupil except in the advanced department. That is too late.

Susan Ervin-Tripp, "An analysis of the interaction of language, topic, and listener", American Anthropologist, (Dec. 1964), 86-102.

Kathryn Meadow, "Early manual communication in relation to the deaf child's intellectual, social, and communicative functioning", American Annals of the Deaf, 113 (1968), 29-41.